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## New York Magazine

# Gridlock at 30,000 Feet

What went so catastrophically wrong.

By Michael Idov Published Nov 5, 2007

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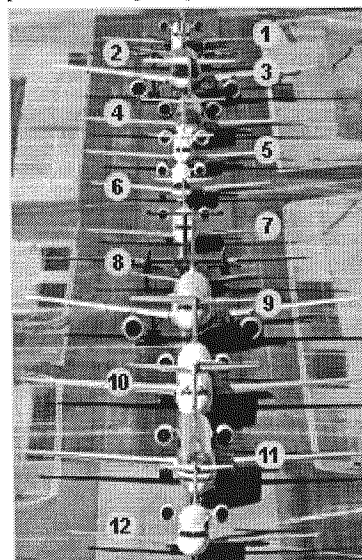
Passengers at La Guardia on October 26's American Eagle Flight 822 to Des Moines. It was scheduled to depart at 5:55 p.m. but took off at 7:23 p.m.  
(Photo: Vincent LaForet)

**I**t's not your imagination: Flying into or out of New York is the worst it's ever been. In fact, our airports are the worst in the country. According to the FAA, Kennedy, La Guardia, and Newark hold the three bottom spots in the national on-time arrival competition. Newark has the most delayed landings, with only 57 percent of flights coming in on time. La Guardia is second to last, with 58 percent, and JFK is third worst, with 59 percent. Leaving is no picnic, either. JFK boasts the most sluggish takeoffs of the nation's 32 major airports: Barely three out of five departing flights leave the so-called Gateway to the World on time. (Newark and La Guardia don't fare much better on that front, ranking No. 30 and No. 25, respectively.) All in all, over one third of the nation's delays happen in the New York metro area. The Port Authority estimates that our airports' inefficiency will cost us \$200 million this year in passengers' lost time alone.

**EXHIBIT E**

**Taxiing at La Guardia on  
October 29 at 12:02 p.m.**

*Scheduled departures provided by  
airlines; actual departures  
provided by FlightStats.com.*



**1. Air Canada 745 to Montreal**

Scheduled: **11:10**

Actual: **12:32**

**2. Colgan Air 4806 to  
Syracuse**

Scheduled: **11:50**

Actual: **12:20**

**3. US Airlines 2173 to D.C.**

Scheduled: **12:00**

Actual: **12:27**

**4. Midwest Airlines YX4 to  
Milwaukee**

Scheduled: **11:20**

Actual: **12:18**

**5. Mesa Airlines 7209 to D.C.**

Scheduled **9:50**

Actual: **12:22**

**6. American Eagle 839 to  
Toronto**

Scheduled: **11:40**

Actual: **12:15**

**7. Comair 606 to Savannah**

Scheduled: **11:45**

Actual: **12:14**

**8. Piedmont Airlines 4251 to  
Buffalo**

Scheduled: **11:26**

Actual: **12:12**

**9. Northwest 177 to Memphis**

Scheduled: **11:10**

Actual: **12:09**

**10. Delta 1918 to Boston**

Scheduled: **11:30**

Actual: **12:08**

**11. American Airlines 321 to  
Chicago**

Scheduled: **11:35**

Actual: **12:06**

**12. Comair 462 to Columbus**

Scheduled: **10:55**

Actual: **12:05**

But if delays began and ended in New York, we could probably file them under Colorful Local Annoyances, alongside subway woes and summer blackouts, and accept them as yet another levy for living here. When it comes to airports, however, New York's problem is the world's problem: Close to 3,700 flights stream through our three airports daily. And our sluggishness infects the entire grid. "If you look at the delay signature in New York and on the national level, you can see it propagating delays into the national system," says John Hansman, an MIT scientist who studies air-traffic patterns. When a tardy Kennedy flight finally makes it to a hub like O'Hare—already stretched thin itself—air-traffic controllers are forced to put other, more-punctual arrivals in holding patterns to accommodate the one that's already outrageously late; the ensuing domino effect can mean missed connections and lost luggage from Seattle to Sarasota. According to Kevin Mitchell of the Business Travel Coalition, 75 percent of delays around the country originate in New York. Since only 33 percent of the total delays actually



happen here, this means that every local delay triggers more than two delays elsewhere.

The problem isn't entirely new: Our airports have been watching their performance go down the tubes ever since the U.S. airline industry started digging itself out of its early-aughts slump. This year, however, we reached the breaking point. At JFK, delays beset 33 percent of total flights in the first quarter. By July, that number hit 41 percent. Extreme delays—one hour and over—are up 114 percent. Everybody's heard about the system meltdown that kept hundreds of JetBlue passengers imprisoned on nine jets for six to ten hours this February at JFK. That may have been the most highly publicized instance of the dysfunctional system, but it was far from the only one. Six months later, in August, an American Airlines flight to La Guardia spent more than five hours glued to the tarmac. And a recent Continental flight from Caracas to Newark was diverted to Baltimore and stranded there for five hours. (Passengers were detained an additional two hours for questioning, after a few onboard voiced their impatience a little too forcefully.)

By September, New York's airport mess was beginning to look a lot like a national crisis. Once the August delay figures came in—clinching the worst summer on record, here and nationwide—Washington started to pay attention. "Don't be surprised when the government steps in," said FAA chief Marion Blakey in a speech on September 11, just before leaving her post. Soon after, President Bush was grilling Blakey's replacement, Bobby Sturgell, and Sturgell's boss, Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, on the JFK situation. The result of the meeting was the creation of a quick-acting task force with two months to formulate a solution. "We've got a problem, we understand there's a problem, and we're going to address the problem," declared Bush. The message was clear: We've got an emergency on our hands, and New York is at the epicenter.

**P**art of the problem, of course, is the sheer number of people moving through our packed runways, overloaded terminals, and crammed airspace. Last year, New York airports handled 104 million fliers—and nearly 1.25 million takeoffs and landings (which is more than Chicago's O'Hare, the nation's busiest single airport, combined with Midway). JFK handles five times as many international flights as any other airport in the U.S. and also happens to be the country's premier destination for foreign freight. The peculiarity of our location—we're practically equidistant from the West Coast and Western Europe—means that late afternoon, our rush hour for domestic departures, is also the peak time for international arrivals. Beyond that, there is the issue of massively increasing demand: If current growth holds up, by 2025, we're expected to be processing 150 million travelers a year. The forces driving the flood of fliers include New York's swelling population, a healthy economy that puts more travel money in consumers' pockets, a recent boom in private and chartered aircraft, and, last but not least, the rise of the no-frills carriers. (The poster child for low-cost flying is JetBlue; the JFK-headquartered company has gone from zero to the largest single-airline presence at the airport in less than eight years.) "We just have too many aircraft in the system," says Jim May, an airline lobbyist.

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